

Four-footed fell walkers

What does the future hold for the hardy fell pony? **Steve and Ann Toon** visited the uplands of Cumbria in search of an answer



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IT'S **STANDING ROOM ONLY** around the auction ring at the Crooklands mart for the annual Fell Pony Sale. Ruddy-faced Cumbrian hill farmers rub shoulders with teenagers. Tweed breeches and waxed jackets, T-shirts and skinny jeans, all with a common passion.

Lathomdale Stardust is in the ring, a lively foal sporting the show champion's rosette, which it won earlier in the day. Bidding is brisk, and the colt is knocked down to the Ringstone Stud of Devon for 1200 guineas. Best price of the



day, though, goes to Greenholme Kate, a black filly foal fetching 1,600gns.

Fell pony enthusiasts have travelled to Cumbria from all over the country to attend this annual sale, to buy, sell, or simply to enjoy the occasion. This hardy native breed, good tempered but tough as nails, enjoys a devoted following and can even boast royal patronage – the Queen has ridden fell ponies since a girl and breeds them too, while Prince Phillip used four fells on his competitive driving team.

Easily trained and good with people, fell ponies are great riding ponies, known for their sure-footed trot and good hock action, and for their pace and endurance. Their size and their steady temperament makes them popular animals in riding and trekking stables, and the Fell Pony Society, established in 1922 to ensure the purity of North West England's traditional breed, enjoys a membership of 1,200, with affiliated groups in North America and Europe.

But for traditionalists, it's a semi-feral life ranging the fells that signifies a true fell pony, and some fear that, as more are kept as 'pet' animals, they are losing their breed characteristics and ruggedness.

The fell pony is classed as vulnerable by the Rare Breeds Survival Trust, with fewer than 900 breeding mares, and the number of ponies running on the fells is steadily diminishing. Fewer than a dozen people keep ponies on the fells now, some with only three or four animals, and only three breeders have more than 20 mares.

Historically associated with the old counties of Cumberland and Westmorland and surrounding areas of Northumberland, Yorkshire and Galloway, the fell pony was once as characteristic

of the Cumbrian landscape as the Herdwick sheep, and an essential part of the agricultural economy. Every farm had its ponies, and they were used for all manner of work: ploughing, hauling muck, delivering milk to the dairy, mowing bracken, taking the kids to school.

But by the 1950s, farmers were turning to mechanisation, and the fell pony was rapidly replaced by the tractor. Today, these sturdy, but agile animals are still used in steep areas where tractors cannot operate, for light forestry work, transporting gear for repairing footpaths, and for carrying grouse and stags off the hill. But the number of working animals has fallen to a handful.

None of the remaining ponies living a semi-feral existence on the open fells are truly wild; all are owned by someone with commoners' rights. Like the Herdwick sheep, fell ponies are 'hefted' to their area of fell, treating it as a home range from which they will not stray, and with knowledge of every patch of good grazing, every sheltered spot, every source of water. They thrive on rough grazing, and can survive a harsh winter on minimal food, losing up to one third of their body weight.

For the handful of enthusiasts who continue to run ponies on the fells, it's a labour of love.

"They've got to be in your blood or you wouldn't keep them," says farmer Bill Potter, (pictured above), now semi-retired, who has run ponies on the fells above Shap, as part of the Greenholme





Fell pony characteristics

To the untutored eye, a fell pony has the appearance of a miniature cart horse; sturdy, round-ribbed and with a long luxuriant mane.

The Fell Pony Society states that a fell pony should be 'as hard as iron', with the 'unmistakeable appearance of hardiness peculiar to mountain ponies' but also a 'lively and alert appearance and great bone'. The ideal fell pony is 13.2 hands, though up to 14 hands is acceptable. Typically, they weigh between 350 and 450kg. Acceptable colours are black, brown, bay or grey, but not chestnut, piebald or skewbald. Some have a small star on their forehead, or a small amount of white on their hind feet.

Fell pony breeder and show judge Bill Potter says a good fell pony is 'like building a house, you must have a good strong foundation.' That means big round feet, open heeled and with characteristic blue horn, sloping pasterns that are not too long, short cannon bones, plenty of good flat bone beneath big, well-formed knees, and strong, muscular legs and hindquarters.

A strong, short back with a deep body, short neck, and a small head, with small, alert ears, big nostrils, a wide muzzle and big, bold, intelligent eyes are characteristic. And plenty of hair: mane and tail are left to grow long, and a fell pony should have plenty of fine hair at its heels.

HARDY: Truly wild fell ponies are now rare, but the breed can still command good prices in the auction ring



NATIVE BREEDS

stud for many years. Greenholme bloodlines are very highly rated in the fell pony world, and have accounted for countless show champions, as well as supplying ponies to the Queen and Prince Phillip.

Bill's ponies spend most of the year on the Birkbeck fells above the farm, only coming in-bye at the start of June for foaling, then going back on the fell at the end of September.

"The foals are a bit of work in the first year with microchipping and passports, but after that they look after themselves," he says. "There's not very many really wild fell ponies any more, I sold my last four wild ones and we haven't got any now that you couldn't put in a stable or put a halter on."

Bill fears that with the majority of fell ponies now kept off the fells, the breed is losing its characteristic hardiness.

"They're not as good as they used to be, by a long way," he says. "They're looked after better, they're on better ground. If I sell one and buy it back two or three years later, it'll take two years to get acclimatised to the fell again."

Conservation grazers

Keeping ponies on the fells has cost Bill in lost agri-environment payment money, and he's had a long-running argument over how many animals he should be allowed to run on the common land with Natural England, which wants to reduce grazing press on Birkbeck Fells.

Ironically, non-endemic pony breeds such as Polish Koniks ponies are being used elsewhere for conservation grazing. Fell ponies have largely been overlooked as conservation grazers, though the Fell Pony Society is now working with the Rare Breed Survival Trust and Natural England to try to encourage their use.

"Perhaps because they're so successful as working ponies, fells have not been used as much as other native breeds for conservation grazing, but there's a growing number of people recognising the advantages the breed can offer," says Rare Breeds Survival Trust field officer Ruth Dalton. "They're relatively low-maintenance and hardy, able to cope with difficult terrain and rough grazing."

Conservation grazing schemes may offer an opportunity to put fell ponies on new upland locations, but the requirements of such schemes for animals that can be easily moved means they will be unlikely to use semi-feral animals.

If the breed's future on the open fells of Cumbria looks bleak, its continuing popularity as an all-round family pony looks more assured, certainly if the enthusiastic horse-trading at the Crooklands mart is anything to go by.

These same enthusiasts will be riding and showing their mounts at fell pony breed shows throughout the summer months, with the most important being the stallion show in May, and the breed show for young stock on the second Saturday in August, both in the grounds of historic Dalemain House near Ullswater.

Both are terrific days out, and a great chance to enjoy a charismatic pony breed being put through its paces in a beautiful Lakeland location. 🐾



SHOWTIME: The fell pony stallion and colt show is held at Dalemain House, Penrith, Cumbria, each May

The fell pony in history

- The fell pony's historic origins are unclear: it may be descended from the first ponies that migrated from Europe 100,000 years ago, before the English Channel formed, or from a similar pony reintroduced by the Celts before 500BC.

- Many of Britain's early ponies were almost certainly 'improved' by larger cavalry animals brought in by the Romans, but on the northern fells, where conditions don't suit taller animals, the local fell ponies would have remained small.

- By the 11th century, fell ponies were being widely used as pack animals to carry wool, clothes, food and metal ore, as well as for shepherding and hunting.

- Cistercian monks, who owned large swathes of the Lake District from the 12th century onwards, used fells for riding, and it's believed they may have introduced greys (white being a signifier of monastic stock).

- By the early 1800s up to 300 fell ponies a day were departing Kendal, laden with foods, cloth, hides and salt. Pack trains were eventually displaced by coaches and carts, as roads improved, and then by railways, but persisted longer in the Lake District, with its rugged terrain.

- Fell ponies were used as pit animals well into the 20th century, particularly in Northumberland, where several pits had drifts big enough for the ponies. Smaller Welsh and Shetland breeds were preferred underground, but fells were widely used above ground for hauling equipment, and for delivering milk to local villages - big collieries often had a thriving sideline in farming milk herds on the pastures above the pits.

- Fell pony trotting races were a popular Cumbrian sport in the 1880s at country shows, with the best animals attracting big crowds.

- In the late 19th century, breeders began to record pedigrees, and by the 1890s show classes were being held for fell ponies. Riding fell ponies for pleasure took off in the 1950s, when people had more time and money for leisure activities.

- The Fell Pony Society was formed in 1922 to ensure the purity of the traditional breed. Today, all semi-feral society-registered ponies have pedigrees and have their ancestry recorded in stud books dating back more than a century.

